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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN'S POPULAR FRONT PARTY CHAIRMAN URGES
HIGHER USG ENGAGEMENT ON DEMOCRATIZATION

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¶1. (SBU) During an April 10 farewell call on Popular Front Party (PFP) Chairman Ali Kerimli, Ambassador reiterated USG plans for encouraging further democratic development in Azerbaijan and urged Kerimli (whose party is not participating in the May rerun elections) to remain engaged in the process. Ambassador said that the USG would be actively engaged in strengthening civil society, Parliament, respect for human rights, and elections. He noted that the USG together with Azerbaijanis had achieved solid gains during the 2005 election campaign, such as finger inking, exit polling, and removal of the ban on domestic observer registration as an organization, and would continue to push on future human rights concerns.

¶2. (SBU) Kerimli thanked the Ambassador for his efforts and acknowledged that democratic change is primarily dependent upon domestic participation. However, he expressed dismay that the Ambassador had not been able to accomplish more. Overall he was disappointed with the results of the parliamentary elections. Kerimli asked the Ambassador to urge higher-level USG engagement to further push the GOAJ on democratization and respect for human rights. He specifically asked that President Bush deliver a democracy message to President Aliyev in Washington. Ambassador acknowledged that democracy was an important part of President Bush's foreign policy agenda and reminded Kerimli of the high-level engagement by the USG, including key visits by Under Secretary Dobriansky, the Senate Foreign Relations Chairman, and other senior administration and Congressional officials.

¶3. (SBU) Acknowledging the USG's activism on the May 13 parliamentary reruns, Kerimli nevertheless pointed out that the election campaign was quiet to date, a sign he said that indicated people had lost faith in the electoral system and in democratization. He said that serious efforts must be undertaken to restore this faith and to restore the people's expectations of the USG. Ambassador responded that the USG was actively involved in both election programming and in pushing the GOAJ for a free and fair election in May, but also pointed out that USG programming has been addressing the very issue of citizen trust in the process. He noted civil society and community development programming, but also noted that political activists must continue engagement in the process and spur activism by appealing to average citizens. The USG can only help open the door to further democratization, he said; local activists must take the steps to walk through it. Kerimli seemingly acknowledged the Ambassador's point, but responded that it was not the fault of the people if they could not fight a "violent and armed" government.

¶4. (SBU) Expounding on his belief that the opposition is fighting an uphill battle against the GOAJ, Kerimli told

Ambassador that the situation had markedly deteriorated following the November elections. As evidence, he noted the closed trial of Yeni Fikir activists, asserted that the number of political prisoners had grown, and reported that every application PFP had made for a mass demonstration since November 26 had been rejected. (NOTE: This is the first time we've heard that any political parties had applied for rallies since the violent November 26 rally). Ambassador encouraged Kerimli to inform the Embassy about problems they encounter such as freedom of assembly, saying that the USG had and would continue to argue on behalf of the rights of all political parties to operate unencumbered, including to hold meetings with voters and mass demonstrations.

HARNISH